

# Outdoor Warning Siren Fact Sheet

## **General**

- The National Weather Service DOES NOT control, activate, own or maintain any sirens.
- Sirens are typically purchased, installed and maintained by local or county officials.
- Local or county officials establish siren activation policies which vary among Wisconsin counties and cities. Contact county or city officials to learn about local policies.
- Some Wisconsin county sirens are activated from 911 Communication Centers while others are activated by municipal/city police, fire-fighters, or dispatchers.
- Sirens in Wisconsin are activated for a variety of scenarios: 1) all sirens in the county at once, 2) groups or zones of sirens, or 3) individually. Contact county or city officials to learn about local policies.
- During an actual emergency, sirens sound a steady tone for roughly 3-minutes.
- Sirens sound a steady tone for roughly 45-seconds during tests.
- Sirens have an effective range from roughly 2500 to 7000 feet. They are not meant to be heard indoors. Warning information can be obtained via other sources, such as text alerts and e-mail alerts.
- Lightning, tornadoes, and thunderstorm winds can knock out a siren, or cut off electrical power to the siren. Some sirens may not have battery-backup capability.

## **Activation**

- In general, outdoor warning sirens are activated for these situations (check with county or city officials to find out what criteria are used in your area):
  - A confirmed funnel cloud has been spotted by trained emergency first responders, trained severe weather spotters, or National Weather Service employees.
  - A confirmed tornado has been spotted by trained emergency first responders, trained severe weather spotters, or National Weather Service employees.
  - The National Weather Service has issued a Tornado Warning (tornado has been sighted, or is highly imminent based on Doppler radar information and/or trained spotter information).
  - The National Weather Service has issued a Severe Thunderstorm Warning. Outdoor siren activation policy varies for these warnings. Contact county officials to find out situation in your area.
    - Some counties activate outdoor sirens for all Severe Thunderstorm Warnings no matter the strength of the gusts.

- Some counties activate outdoor sirens only for powerful, hurricane-force winds of 74 mph or higher.
  - Many counties never activate outdoor sirens for Severe Thunderstorm Warnings.
- A hazardous, chemical or biological emergency has occurred resulting in shelter-in-place orders.
- Alert volunteer fire departments to report to a fire or the local firehouse.
- Outdoor warning sirens are not activated for Tornado Watches, nor are they used as an “all-clear” signal.

### **What to Do When the Sirens Sound**

- When Outdoor Warning Sirens are activated, take immediate action to minimize injuries and fatalities. You will only have a short amount of time to make a life or death decision.
- Advance planning and quick response are the keys to surviving a tornado. Have a shelter location identified before the emergency arises.
- Prepare yourself in advance by discussing safety plans with your coworkers and families and know where to meet and who to contact when the storm passes.
- Refrain from calling the 911 Communications Center to find out what the emergency is. Only call if you have an actual emergency.
- If you are in a structure (e.g. residence, small building, school, nursing home, hospital, factory, shopping center, high-rise building):
  - Go to a pre-designated shelter area such as a safe room, basement, storm cellar, or the lowest level of the building. If there is no basement, go to the center of an interior room on the lowest level (closet, interior hallway) away from corners, windows, doors, and outside walls. Put as many walls as possible between you and the outside. Get under a sturdy table and use your arms to protect your head and neck.
  - In a high-rise building, go to a small interior room or hallway on the lowest floor possible.
  - Shopping malls and auditoriums (any building with wide-span roofs) are not considered a safe shelter.
  - Do not open windows.
  - Listen to the radio, TV, and/or NOAA All Hazard Alert Radio with battery backup capability for additional information on weather conditions, evacuation/shelter-in-place instructions, and updates on when conditions are safe.
- If you are in a vehicle, trailer, or mobile home:
  - Get out immediately and go to the lowest floor of a sturdy, nearby building or storm shelter. Mobile homes, even if tied down, offer little protection from tornadoes.

- If you are outside with no shelter:
  - Lie flat in a nearby ditch or depression and cover your head with your hands. Be aware of the potential for flooding.
  - Do not get under an overpass or bridge. You are safer in a low, flat location.
  - Never try to outrun a tornado in urban or congested areas in a car or truck, or go under a highway overpass. Instead, leave the vehicle immediately for safe shelter.
  - Watch out for flying debris. Flying debris from tornadoes causes most fatalities and injuries.

### **Testing**

- Outdoor warning sirens are tested at various intervals based on county or local policies. Contact county or local officials to find out what the test policy is in your area.
- A test may be postponed until the next regularly scheduled test if severe weather is forecast or observed in the area. Contact county or local officials to find out what the test policy is in your area.
- Many outdoor warning sirens are activated during the annual Wisconsin Tornado & Severe Weather Awareness Week campaign. At 1:45 p.m., Thursday, April 18, 2013, a test tornado warning will be issued by National Weather Service Offices in Wisconsin. The warning duration is 15-minutes. Additionally, this test warning will be tone-activated on NOAA Weather Radio All Hazards receivers.

### **Tornado Watch vs. Tornado Warning**

- A ***Tornado Watch*** is issued by the National Weather Service when conditions are favorable for the development of tornadoes. This is the time to remind family members where the safest places within your home are located and listen to your radio or television for further developments.
- A ***Tornado Warning*** is issued by the National Weather Service when a tornado has been sighted or is highly imminent based on Doppler radar information and/or trained spotter information. Take shelter immediately.